



NORTH DAKOTA
DEPARTMENT *of* HEALTH

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release:
May 27, 2004

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West Nile Virus Surveillance Activities Begin June 1 ***Residents Asked To Report Observations of Sick or Dead Birds***

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Department of Health – in conjunction with several local, state, federal and private agencies – is coordinating West Nile virus surveillance activities again this year. In 2003, 617 human cases and five deaths were reported to the Department of Health. In addition, West Nile infection was identified in 41 horses, 168 birds and 11 mosquito pools.

Surveillance activities include reporting and testing sick horses and dead birds, trapping and testing mosquitoes and monitoring illnesses in humans. The North Dakota Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory at North Dakota State University will test dead birds and horses for West Nile virus and the Division of Microbiology of the North Dakota Department of Health will test samples from humans.

Since one of the best methods of detecting West Nile virus is to test wild birds, the state health department is asking North Dakotans to report observations of any sick or dying birds, especially crows and blue jays.

“Starting June 1, people who notice sick or dead birds may contact their local public health unit, Indian Health Service sanitarian, veterinarian, extension agent, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the USDA Wildlife Services or the North Dakota Department of Health,” said Tracy Miller, Epidemiology and Surveillance Program manager for the Department of Health. “Although not all birds can be tested because of decomposition, any of these agencies can make arrangements to have acceptable birds sent for West Nile virus testing.”

A person cannot catch the virus by touching a dead bird; however, anyone handling any dead bird or animal should always take precautions, such as wearing protective gloves.

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Visit the health department home page at www.ndhealth.gov.

The best protection against West Nile virus infection is to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes. To reduce the risk of being bitten by mosquitoes, people are urged to take the following protective measures:

- Use insect repellent containing DEET that has been approved by the Environmental Protection Agency, and apply according to manufacture's instructions.
- Limit outdoor activities between dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are most likely to bite.
- Eliminate stagnant water in containers around homes where mosquitoes can lay their eggs (e.g., buckets, flowerpots, old tires, wading pools and birdbaths).
- Keep the grass around your home trimmed.

Most people infected with West Nile virus experience no symptoms or have only mild symptoms, such as fever and headaches. More severe infection may include high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, altered mental state and death. Although the elderly are more likely to have severe infections, anyone who develops severe symptoms should consult a physician.

For more information, contact Tracy Miller or Melissa Casteel, North Dakota Department of Health, at 701.328.2378.

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